

Shakespeare's Sonnets



Edited by James Schiffer

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

CRITICAL ESSAYS

EDITED BY
JAMES SCHIFFER

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Cover photograph of Agnes Wilcox performing selected Sonnets, April 28, 1998; The New Theatre, St. Louis, Missouri.

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GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The continuing goal of the Garland Shakespeare Criticism series is to provide the most influential historical criticism, the most significant contemporary interpretations, and reviews of the most influential productions. Each volume in the series, devoted to a Shakespearean play or poem (e.g., the sonnets, *Venus and Adonis*, the *Rape of Lucrece*), includes the most essential criticism and reviews of Shakespeare's work from the late seventeenth century to the present. The series thus provides, through individual volumes, a representative gathering of critical opinion of how a play or poem has been interpreted over the centuries.

A major feature of each volume in the series is the editor's introduction. Each volume editor provides a substantial essay identifying the main critical issues and problems the play (or poem) has raised, charting the critical trends in looking at the work over the centuries, and assessing the critical discourses that have linked the play or poem to various ideological concerns. In addition to examining the critical commentary in light of important historical and theatrical events, each introduction functions as a discursive bibliographic essay that cites and evaluates significant critical works—essays, journal articles, dissertations, books, theatre documents—and gives readers a guide to research on the particular play or poem.

After the introduction, each volume is organized chronologically, by date of publication of selections, into two sections: critical essays and theatre reviews/documents. The first section includes previously published journal articles and book chapters as well as original essays written for the collection. In selecting essays, editors have chosen works that are representative of a given age and critical approach. Striving for accurate historical representation, editors include earlier as well as contemporary criticism. Their goal is to include the widest possible range of critical approaches to the play or poem to demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of critical response.

In most instances, essays have been reprinted in their entirety, not butchered into snippets. The editors have also commissioned original essays (sometimes as many as five to ten) by leading Shakespearean scholars, thus offering the most contemporary, theoretically attentive analyses. Reflecting some recent critical approaches in Shakespearean studies, these new essays approach the play or poem from a multiplicity of perspectives, including feminist, Marxist, new historical, semiotic, mythic, performance/staging, cultural, and/or a combination of these and other methodologies. Some volumes in the series even include bibliographic analyses that have significant implications for criticism.

The second section of each volume in the series is devoted to the play in performance and, again, is organized chronologically by publication date, beginning with some of the earliest and most significant productions and proceeding to the most recent. This section, which ultimately provides a theatre history of the play, should not be regarded as different from or rigidly isolated from the critical essays in the first section. Shakespearean criticism has often been informed by or has significantly influenced productions. Shakespearean criticism over the last twenty years or so has usefully been labeled the “Age of Performance.” Readers will find information in this section on major foreign productions of Shakespeare’s plays as well as landmark productions in English. Consisting of more than reviews of specific productions, this section also contains a variety of theatre documents, including interpretations written for a particular volume by notable directors whose comments might be titled “The Director’s Choice,” histories of seminal productions (e.g., Peter Brook’s *Titus Andronicus* in 1955), and even interviews with directors and/or actors. Editors have also included photographs from productions around the world to help readers see and further appreciate the way a Shakespearean play has taken shape in the theatre.

Each volume in the Garland Shakespeare Criticism series strives to give readers a balanced, representative collection of the best that has been thought and said about a Shakespearean play or poem. In essence, each volume supplies a careful survey of essential materials in the history of criticism for a Shakespearean play or poem. In offering readers complete, fulfilling, and in some instances very hard to locate materials, editors have made conveniently accessible the literary and theatrical criticism of Shakespeare’s greatest legacy, his work.

Philip C. Kolin
University of Southern Mississippi

Preface

This collection of essays has been assembled with a special “dispensation” to diverge from the usual content for volumes in the Garland Shakespeare Criticism series. Unlike most of the other volumes in the series, this one does not have a section for essays and reviews devoted to performance issues. Furthermore, this collection has many more new essays than reprinted ones, sixteen to four, and the four reprints are recent essays, all from the 1990s. In other words, this volume concentrates solely on contemporary interpretations. At one point the plan had been to offer fewer new essays and to include criticism going back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the first ninety years of the twentieth. One disadvantage of that plan was that it would be difficult—if not impossible—to represent all the important interpretations of the Sonnets that have been proffered over the last two hundred years.

Limiting this volume to new and recent essays has given it greater coherence and a stronger reason for being than it otherwise would have had: to the best of my knowledge, this is *the* collection of essays on the Sonnets (at least in English) of the 1990s. The last important critical anthologies were Harold Bloom’s in 1987 and a long section of volume 10 of the Gale Shakespeare Criticism series edited by James Person and Sandra L. Williamson, which was published in 1990. Bloom’s edition consists of a brief introduction and reprints of five important “modern interpretations” by C. L. Barber (1960), Rosalie Colie (1974), Stephen Booth (1977), Thomas M. Greene (1985), and Howard Felperin (1985). The Gale volume includes excerpts (rarely complete essays) from the writings of approximately eighty authors, from Francis Meres (1598) to John Kerrigan (1986). It was to avoid overlap with these two

anthologies—as well as several earlier ones—that the Garland editors and I decided finally to limit this collection to essays from the present decade. My one regret about the new plan was that the book would no longer include selections by Stephen Booth, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, or Joel Fineman. My consolation is that the importance of the work of all three authors is universally recognized by scholars today. Judging from the many times they are cited in the essays that follow, I think it is fair to say that the spirits of Booth, Sedgwick, and Fineman inhabit these pages.

The 1990s have been a time of important new investigation of Shakespeare's Sonnets, and there is exciting work being done by a number of different scholars who use a great variety of methods and come to an equally varied set of conclusions. The nineteen essays gathered here demonstrate the validity of many different contemporary approaches, as well as the high quality of work being done today on these fascinating poems. These contributors, some in disagreement with others in the volume, address an exciting range of topics, from Shakespeare's relation to Petrarch to early modern codes of maternity to *A Lover's Complaint* as a commentary on and conclusion to the story the Sonnets tell. Most of the essays in this volume, by the way, were completed before publication in late 1997 of Helen Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* and Katherine Duncan-Jones's New Arden edition; therefore, few of the new essays refer to these works. I have tried in my introduction to address issues raised by these two books and more generally by these two important scholars. New work comes out all the time on the Sonnets, and there can never be a volume that is entirely up to date. (I have just learned, for example, of Michael Innes's book, *Shakespeare and the English Renaissance Sonnet* [Macmillan/St. Martin's, 1997]).

A brief note on style: all the new essays follow slightly modified MLA guidelines for documentation style and other related matters; however, the four reprinted essays retain the spelling, punctuation, and documentation styles of their original publications, with the following exception: throughout the volume, references to the "Sonnets" (i.e., the collection as a whole) will be capitalized but not italicized; references to individual sonnets (e.g., sonnet 24) will not be capitalized. The essays by Peter Stallybrass, Margreta de Grazia, and Heather Dubrow have been updated by the authors for this publication; George T. Wright's essay is actually a new essay that will be published for the first time in a separate collection just before this one.

For this project I have relied on the kindness of both friends and strangers. First of all, I wish to express a tremendous debt to my nineteen authors for their excellent work and for their discipline in helping to keep this project on track—indeed, ahead of schedule. To David Bevington and Heather Dubrow I owe great thanks for recommending possible contributors when I was just getting started. In fact, several colleagues represented in this volume participated in the seminar on Shakespeare's Sonnets organized by Dubrow and Inga-Stina Ewbank for the 1996 World Shakespeare Congress: George T. Wright, Joyce Sutphen, Michael Schoenfeldt, Lars Engle, Rebecca Laroche, and Bruce R. Smith (essays in this collection by Engle, Laroche, and Smith, however, were not based on papers presented at the World Congress). I would also like to thank Stephen Greenblatt, Dorothea Kehler, Katherine Eisaman Maus, Marianne Novy, Clark Hulse, and Linda Boose for suggesting the names of scholars I might invite to contribute. Bruce R. Smith also assisted by recommending possible reprints for this volume and by contacting more than one author on my behalf; his enthusiasm about this book has been important to me from the start.

I began work on this project in July 1995, while I was in Oxford helping to direct the Virginia Program at Oxford. I am grateful to the librarians at the Bodleian Library for their assistance. In the summer of 1996 I worked at the Folger Shakespeare Library, and I was fortunate to return for three months in 1997 thanks to a short-term Folger fellowship combined with professional development funds from Hampden-Sydney College. At the Folger, I wish to thank fellowship coordinator Carol Brobeck, head librarian Richard Kuhta, reference librarian Georgianna Ziegler, librarian Betsy Walsh, and the rest of the fabulous Folger staff. I am also indebted to the librarians in the Rare Book Room at the Library of Congress, as well as to Margaret Kieckhefer of the Library of Congress's Photoduplication Department. While at the Folger I profited from many stimulating discussions about the Sonnets (and many other matters) with Valerie Traub, Richard A. Levin, Bruce R. Smith, Marvin Hunt, Goran Stanivukovic, Gail Kern Paster, Barbara Mowat, Jeffrey Masten, Mark Bland, Janice Devereux, David Harris Sacks, Marshall Grossman, Jay Halio, and (by phone) Joseph Pequigney: several of these colleagues read and commented on a section of my introduction that I presented as a paper at the Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance Conference (PMR) at Villanova University in September 1997. My good friend Carole Levin encouraged me with

this project in countless ways; it was she, for example, who invited me to present my essay at PMR. I am obliged as well to Tom Olsen, who chaired the session and lively discussion at the conference.

At Garland I have enjoyed working with editors Phyllis Korper (who left at the end of 1997) and Kristi Long, as well as with computer specialist Chuck Bartelt. I would also like to express my gratitude to series editor Philip C. Kolin for assigning me this project. At Hampden-Sydney College, I owe thanks to many. The Professional Development Committee approved two summer research grants and a year's sabbatical in 1997-1998 to work on this project, and I received funds as well from the William W. Elliott Professorship endowment. My colleagues in Shakespeare Diana Rhoads and Scott Colley, former dean of the faculty, have been supportive in many ways, and I have learned much from Hassell Simpson's work-in-progress on the Psalms and the Sonnets. To my students in Shakespeare classes over the years I think I can attribute many of my insights into these poems. I would also like to recognize assistance from the librarians at Hampden-Sydney, especially Gerry Randall, Catherine Polari, and Sharon Goad. I am grateful as well to Sherry Giles in the Hampden-Sydney Computing Center for her help with many technical matters and for allowing me to use her laser printer. Jane Mahne, heroic secretary of Morton Hall, also let me use her printer. My colleague in philosophy Patrick Wilson gave me a valuable lesson in using Word 6, while Pam Fox of our Fine Arts Department very generously and skillfully printed my illustrations. Other close friends who have helped along the way include Steve Shapiro, Richard Stern, and Rosalind Hingeley. I have also been blessed with the loving support of my stepmother, Dolores Schiffer, and inspired by my brothers, Stephen and Fred. To my children, Tanja and Toby, and to my wife, Susan, as always, I owe the greatest thanks of all.

James Schiffer



Figure 1. Agnes Wilcox performing selected Sonnets. The New Theatre, St. Louis, Missouri. April 28, 1998. Photo by Kevin Lowder. Reproduced by permission of The New Theatre.

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PART I

Introduction

Reading New Life into Shakespeare's Sonnets

A Survey of Criticism

James Schiffer

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?

—Sonnet 53.1-2¹

A common practice in many accounts of the reception history of Shakespeare's Sonnets is to complain, often in tones of comic despair, about the crushing volume of criticism, the mountain of essays, dissertations, chapters, books, poems, plays, and novels on these most problematic of poems—a mountain any surveyor must attempt to climb. Even at the start of the biographical debates in the early nineteenth century, James Boswell the younger protested: "There are few topics connected with Shakespeare upon which the ingenuity and research of his critics have been more fruitlessly exercised, than upon the questions which have arisen with regard to the poems before us, the individual to whom they were principally addressed, and the circumstances under which they were written" (20: 218). And by the end of the last century, Swinburne could write: "Upon the Sonnets such a preposterous pyramid of presumptuous commentary has long since been reared by the Cimmerian speculation and Boeotian 'brain-sweat' of sciolists and scholiasts, that no modest man will hope and no wise man will desire to add to the structure or subtract from it one brick of proof or disproof, theorem or theory" (62). That "structure" is much greater now, of course, after another century of voluminous discussion,